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Fyre Fight: The Inside Story of How We Got Two Warring Fyre Festival Documentaries in the Same Week

Netflix and Hulu are rolling out competing docs on the same scammer festival, and millennials have a 'Deep Impact' vs. 'Armageddon' to call their own. But is one film more ethical than the other?

By Scott Tobias | Jan 15, 2019, 6:10am EST

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We've seen [the "twin films" phenomenon](#) before. Two films on the same subject are released weeks apart by competing studios—it's led to classic dustups in the recent past, including *Dante's Peak* vs. *Volcano* in 1997, *Deep Impact* vs. *Armageddon* in 1998, and *No Strings Attached* vs. *Friends with Benefits* in 2011. So it was only a matter of time until the streaming giants went to war over competing concepts. But there's never been as much overlap as there is between the two documentaries on Fyre Festival debuting this week: Chris Smith's *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* on Netflix and Jenner Furst and Julia Willoughby Nason's *Fyre Fraud* on Hulu. With Netflix's doc due out on Friday (and formally announced back in early December), Hulu engaged in a clever bit of subterfuge by dropping its Fyre doc on

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Monday morning.

Now the tension between the two projects has erupted, much like *Dante's Peak* and *Volcano*, over ethical grounds.

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First, a little context: Fyre Festival was a two-weekend music event intended as a promotional boost for the Fyre Media app, which billed itself as an Uber for bookings. The founder, Billy McFarland, and his partner, the rapper Ja Rule, intended Fyre Festival to be a high-end experience, with attendees flying to a secluded island in the Bahamas (*Pablo Escobar's island*, as the

promos touted), where they'd stay in luxury beachside villas, eat gourmet food, and take in performances by Major Lazer, Blink-182, Migos, and a host of other acts and surprise guests. What they got instead, on the last weekend of April 2017, was a fiasco in full view of social media, with rain-soaked FEMA disaster tents over an unfinished lot near the Sandals resort in Great Exuma, a first-night dinner of plain bread with two pieces of cheese and an undressed salad, and a slew of other catastrophes. Fyre Festival was cancelled before a single band took the stage, but not before a new generation got a low-rent, scammer's Altamont to call their own.

Fyre and *Fyre Fraud* arrive at many of the same conclusions about what happened with the festival, and both documentaries place much of the blame on McFarland, a scam artist who was subsequently sentenced to six years in federal prison for wire fraud. However, the major difference between them is that the Hulu doc has an

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exclusive interview with McFarland and the Netflix doc does not. In the course of preparing a profile on Chris Smith (*American Movie, Jim & Andy: The Great Beyond*) for *The Ringer*, coming later this week, I asked Smith on Monday about the Hulu documentary that was released earlier in the day. What he said wound up sparking a kind of ethics-off between the two camps.

"We were aware of [the Hulu production] because we were supposed to film Billy McFarland for an interview," says Smith. "He told us that they were offering \$250,000 for an interview. He asked us if we would pay him \$125,000. And after spending time with so many people who had such a negative impact on their lives from their experience on Fyre, it felt particularly wrong to us for him to be benefiting. It was a difficult decision but we had to walk away for that reason. So then he came back and asked if we would do it for \$100,000 in cash. And we still said this wasn't something that was going to work for us."

Reached for comment, *Fyre Fraud* director Jenner Furst, who codirected the film with his creative partner, Julia Willoughby Nason, admitted that the production paid McFarland for licensed behind-the-scenes footage and consent to an eight-hour interview. As for the amount paid to McFarland, he emphatically denied the \$250,000 figure.

"I can't tell you the amount," he said, "but what I can tell you is that if you printed [\$250,000], that would be a lie. That was not the amount. It was less than that. I don't know why Chris [Smith] is quoting him that way. We both made a film about the same person. We know the person is a compulsive liar."

It seems highly possible, given McFarland's reputation, that the number he quoted to

the Netflix crew for his services was inflated as a means of leveraging a higher payout from Netflix for an interview. (And it's perhaps an act of diabolical genius that McFarland has done his part to set the documentaries against each other rather than keeping the heat on him.) But Furst also defended his and Willoughby Nason's decision to make a deal with McFarland.

"We began preproducing this in July 2017 with the intent to go far beyond the headlines, to acquire all the footage we could get our hands on, and to tell the deepest, most impactful story," says Furst. "Not just a comedy, not just 'Look at these millennials who got caught on an island,' but a bigger think piece about our generation that was a cautionary tale with deep implications that relate to our political system, to our current president ... something far beyond just a meme quality."

As a counterpoint, Furst also noted that Netflix's *Fyre* was produced in partnership with the social media agency Jerry Media (a.k.a. FuckJerry) and the advertising Matte Projects, two companies who were involved in putting on the festival. The original promos, featuring dazzling footage of supermodels like Bella Hadid and Emily Ratajkowski cavorting in paradise, along with other "influencers," were orchestrated by Jerry Media, which led to a quick sellout of the event. *Fyre Fraud* is much tougher than *Fyre* on Jerry, in particular—the film even references the Netflix project—and Furst is crying foul.

"I feel like there's a bigger ethically compromised position, and that's going and partnering with folks who marketed the Fyre Festival and were well aware that this was not going to happen as planned," says Furst. "That folks were not going to get villas, that folks were not even going to get bathrooms. We have emails that prove that people knew months in advance what was going on and we have a whistle-

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blower from inside that social media company [Jerry] who says that he knew months before that this wasn't going to be what it was sold as."

Furst continues, "It's a little bit of a head-scratcher to say that we have an ethical quandary when it seems like people who got the rest of the world knee deep in shit are making large licensing fees and getting prestige when this thing comes out on Friday. To me, I think it's a little bit of the pot calling the kettle black."

Earlier in the day, the Netflix team responded to questions about its involvement with Jerry Media with the following statement from the filmmakers:

We were happy to work with Jerry Media and a number of others on the film. At no time did they, or any others we worked with, request favorable coverage in our film, which would be against our ethics. We stand behind our film, believe it is an unbiased and illuminating look at what happened, and look forward to sharing it with audiences around the world.

But asked to respond directly to Furst's contentions about the compromises of partnering with companies involved in the festival, the filmmakers said, "They clearly have not seen *Fyre* yet, if they did they would know our depiction of Jerry and Matte is far from aggrandizing and very balanced and fair in our approach."

Furst tells me he has not, in fact, seen the Netflix documentary, and he insists that he doesn't want a "tit for tat" between the two films. "I think [Chris Smith] is a great filmmaker. I think he's done great work over the years, and I think viewers are indulging the opportunity to have as many Fyre Festival documentaries as they could possibly consume. People would be excited to watch 10 of them if there were 10 of them." ■

Scott Tobias is a freelance film and television writer from Chicago. His work has

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